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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000728

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS TACTICS CHANGE SLIGHTLY, CROWDS
STILL MODEST

REF: A. TBILISI 0716

1B. TBILISI 0711

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: A crowd of roughly 5,000-9,000 gathered in front of Parliament at about 3 pm Monday, April 13 to listen to another round of speeches and take further direction from non-parliamentary opposition leaders. At roughly 5:30 pm, the majority of the crowd (Embassy Observers estimate 3,000-4,000) marched to the Presidential Residence to continue protests. The crowd at the Presidential Residence dispersed fairly quickly so that by 7:30 pm only about 1000 people remained. At 8 pm, roughly 1,500 people remained in front of Parliament to protest. The non-parliamentary opposition announced its plan to stay in tents outside of the Presidential Residence, and said it would call protesters to Parliament every day at 3 pm to announce new action plans. End Summary.

12. (C) Comment: Good weather in Tbilisi appears to have helped turnout with the crowd featuring a few more females but nevertheless consisting mainly of older males. Levan Gachechiladze still appears to be the "first among equals" of the non-parliamentary leaders and took the lead in directing the crowd movements. The tent city idea appears to have been somewhat spontaneous as none of the leaders had thought to procure tents beforehand, which leads us to believe the non-parliamentary opposition is making this up as they go along. While the non-parliamentary opposition can likely put 3,000-10,000 protesters in the street at any time, the public remains largely apathetic towards the protests. Increasingly, we are hearing grumbling about the autocratic nature of many of the non-parliamentary leaders from political observers and opposition sympathizers alike. End Comment.

The Rallies Continue but Still No Long Term Plan

13. (C) The non-parliamentary opposition led by Levan Gachechiladze addressed the crowd of 5,000-9,000 in front of Parliament saying that they were going to protest at the Presidential Residence rather than block the roads in front of the Public Broadcasters and traffic circle in Avlabari as they had previously done. (Embassy Comment: EU special representative Peter Semneby told the opposition that he viewed blocking city streets as an unwarranted escalation. This message may have played a role in the changed tactics. End Comment.) MOIA representatives said that they had been told the decision was made to split the crowd into two rather than three groups so as to not dilute their numbers. At approximately 5:30 pm a large column of protesters made their way up to the Presidential Residence where leaders began to make speeches. Another group of about 200-300 headed by Nino Burjanadze and Irakli Alasania, neither of whom attended the rally at Parliament, met the estimated 3,000-4,000 protesters who had made their way from Parliament to the Residence. The group started to disperse soon after it arrived. Observers

saw three or four small tents being set up in front of the main gate. Meanwhile, a small group of younger protesters aged 18-24 were seen openly mocking, taking pictures, and taunting security guards at the residence. MOIA representatives told Poloff they estimated some 1000 protesters were at the Presidential Residence at 7:30 pm.

¶4. (C) A smaller group of roughly 1,500 stayed at Parliament to listen to speeches. An observer told Poloff that as of 9 am the next morning, no tents were seen in front of Parliament and the crowd had dwindled to about 20 protesters. The non-parliamentary opposition has not declared what its next steps will be. Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) told protesters at one point to reconvene at 3 pm at Parliament to await further instructions. MOIA representatives are generally of the opinion that the protest is starting to lose steam and are wary that certain members (Burjanadze is constantly mentioned) will try to create an incident. MOIA again told Poloff their intention is to let the protests simply die out, guessing that the public will soon grow tired of them. The non-parliamentary opposition does not appear to have decided on a long term strategy. Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, Dimitry Shashkin told the Ambassador he thought the non-parliamentary opposition will come under pressure to call off the protests for the Orthodox Easter holidays. Shashkin relayed that he had also been told that the non-parliamentary opposition was considering postponing further demonstrations until May 26 which is the Georgian Independence Day Holiday.

Dissent - Not Particularly Welcome Among the Protest Leaders

TBILISI 00000728 002 OF 002

¶5. (C) In what has now become a public spat, International Chamber of Commerce head, Fadi Asly wrote a scathing letter to David Gamkrelidze (New Rights Party Chairman and Alliance for Georgia Member) which was circulated to the Diplomatic Corps. In the letter, Asly details Gamkrelidze's public comments at Saturday's rally threatening Mr. Asly and one of his colleagues, warning Asly and others to refrain from expressing any negative opinions about the protests. Gamkrelidze's comments were in response to an op-ed that Asly wrote prior to April 9 questioning the wisdom of the protests and expressing his opinion that the protests were bad for Georgia's business climate. (Embassy Note: AmCham considered writing a similar op-ed but decided against it, fearing just such a public reprisal from the non-parliamentary opposition. End Note.) In the letter, Asly chastised Gamkrelidze for threatening those who speak out, noting that Gamkrelidze had "made the freedom of expression and of democracy (his) leitmotif". Asly called upon the non-parliamentary opposition to think less of their personal interests and think about the "immense damage that your sterile protests are causing to every single business in Georgia."

¶6. (C) Vasil Kacharava, Director of American Studies at Tbilisi State University told Poloff that he was very unhappy with the Saakashvili administration but would not take part in protests. Kacharava said he viewed the non-parliamentary opposition as a significantly worse alternative. Kacharava told Poloff that he was disappointed Saakashvili did not use the abundance of expertise available at the university, but that Saakashvili was at least somewhat open to discussion. Kacharava said that while he did not speak for the whole faculty, he and his colleagues were amazed at how the non-parliamentary opposition treated them. Kacharava said that it was impossible to speak to most of the leaders who generally tolerated no opinion that did not conform to their own narrow viewpoints. Kacharava said he found himself in a growing group of politically interested and policy oriented moderates that had no political home. Irakli Alasania himself made the point on numerous occasions to the Ambassador that he could not leave the non-parliamentary

opposition for fear they would destroy him politically if he publicly dissented from their course of action.

TEFFT